

Saigon Said to Oust 3 Aides Of U.S. Over Tie to Tribes

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Sept. 12—The South Vietnamese Government, suspecting the United States of attempts to deal independently with a political movement of mountain tribesmen, has demanded the departure of three American officials, reliable sources said today.

The affair has embittered American-Vietnamese relations and has endangered hopes of freeing South Vietnam's highlands from Vietcong influence.

The problem burst into public view today when it was disclosed that South Vietnamese troops had surrounded and disarmed about 500 soldiers of a political movement called the Unified Front for the Struggle of the Oppressed Races, known from its French-language initials as Fulro. (FULRO)

U.S.-Led Unit Disarmed

It was also disclosed that a unit of American-led Montagnard troops was disarmed last week. "Montagnard" is the collective name for a number of mountain tribes with a population estimated at 700,000 to a million. In race, language and culture, the tribesmen are non-Vietnamese, and they distrust and dislike their lowland neighbors.

The clash between United States and South Vietnamese officials over the issue centers on actions by the American Central Intelligence Agency that have greatly aroused Viet-

namese suspicions. It is also said center on American sympathy for Montagnard aspirations. According to a qualified source, William F. Beachner, a political officer in the United States Embassy, was declared persona non grata by the South Vietnamese along with two employees of an American intelligence agency.

Barry Zorthian, the embassy press officer, has denied that the three men were formally named persona non grata, or unwelcome, but he said the United States had been willing

to remove some officials from jobs associated with the Montagnard problem "to reduce Vietnamese suspicions."

Reliable sources said that in a meeting Friday with high officials of the South Vietnamese Government, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge urged them not to use force to crush the Fulro movement and specifically instructed them not to use American equipment against the tribesmen.

The Americans evidently feared, the sources said, that United States pilots might unknowingly be used in an air strike on four battalions of Fulro troops in the belief that they were being asked to strike Communist units. Yet an American general is said to have advocated just such an air strike to prove "good faith" to the South Vietnamese.

Strategic Effect Feared

While acknowledging that the affair has embarrassed American relations with Saigon, officials are worried primarily about a loss of Montagnard loyalty, on which rest hopes for anti-Communist military success in the Highlands.

Some Americans have been so eager to avoid a final rupture with Montagnard leaders that they have stirred fear among South Vietnamese officials — who commonly refer to Montagnards as "moi," or savages — that the United States is encouraging hopes for a self-governing Montagnard state or region.

The Fulro organization is headed by a Rhade tribesman named Y-B'ham Enuol, who led a Montagnard revolt in 1957. Some South Vietnamese leaders describe it as Communist-tinged or Communist-dominated and lacking in power. American officials believe that it has general support among the 30-odd mountain tribes.

In recent months leaders of Fulro have written American officials many letters outlining their stand, which was originally a demand for autonomy and for a huge Montagnard army to be responsible for military security in the Highlands. The South Vietnamese would not agree to the arming of a po-

tentially rebellious minority.

The Americans sent Mr. Beachner, the controversial political officer, to Darlac Province, a Rhade tribal area that is one of seven provinces in which Montagnards constitute a majority of the population.

As "team chief" of American military and civilian advisers in the province, Mr. Beachner was to carry out an experiment in Administrative procedure. But according to reliable sources, South Vietnamese officials interpreted the move as an ominous attempt to establish political liaison in the Highlands.

For a time, Mr. Beachner and other Americans were permitted and encouraged to attend the prolonged negotiations that have gone on with Fulro representatives in Bannethuot.

But several weeks ago, the sources said, South Vietnam's Defense Minister, Brig. Gen. Nguyen Huu Co, angrily confronted American officials with an English-language document that had fallen into the hands of the Vietnamese Intelligence Service.

This document dismissed discussions of outright autonomy for the Montagnards but then listed a series of concessions that the Vietnamese Government might be induced to accept. General Co. charged that the document had been written by employees of the Central Intelligence Agency to show Fulro leaders "how to negotiate."

At about the same time, the sources said, Mr. Beachner was asked by the Darlac Province chief, a South Vietnamese, if any independent American talks with Fulro were under way. Mr. Beachner, who is said to have been unaware of any, answered no. But he is said to have learned soon afterward that two American officials had indeed been in contact with Montagnard leaders in Darlac Province. The sources said that after that incident Mr. Beachner was unable to prove his good faith.

Pledges Exchanged

As a result of these incidents, a meeting was held at Bannethuot by General Co with Melvin L. Manfull, then chief political officer of the United States Embassy, and with a top American general of the Vietnam command. Some sources describe the meeting as acrimonious.

General Co is said to have demanded that the Americans send a written note to the Fulro representatives, affirming that the United States supported the South Vietnamese Government and would not negotiate with the Montagnards or directly aid them.

The Americans acceded but got in return a statement from General Co to the Fulro leaders, stating that although the Government totally rejected autonomy it was still ready to discuss on social and other demands, such as requests for the restoration of tribal courts, better education and more Montagnard representation in the Government.

But the South Vietnamese began to isolate Americans from the continuing negotiations with Fulro and from any knowledge of Saigon's intentions in the crisis.

When a United States Embassy official tried to break the ice with an assistant to Premier Nguyen Cao Ky, he got a reception that was described as "correct, but just barely." He was told in effect that the South Vietnamese no longer wanted American advice on the Montagnard situation, the sources said.

After a while the Fulro representatives gave the South Vietnamese a new position paper in which they dropped their demand for autonomy but made five milder demands, including one for a "Fulro zone of operations" that would allow Montagnard troops to direct military operations against the Vietcong in the Highlands.

They asked for ammunition, weapons, food and other materials.

Since the meeting with General Co at Bannethuot, the Americans have been cut off from South Vietnamese planning, the sources said. It was to regain the good graces of the Vietnamese that the American general suggested furnish-

ing planes for a bombing raid against Fulro troops, the sources said.

At the last minute, at least, some Americans did know of the plan to disarm a Montagnard strike force led by United States special forces units and to capture and disarm Fulro troops. But many American officials fear that such tactics may bring another Montagnard revolt like the one in September, 1964.